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ABSTRACT

Exploratory language courses are self-contained, nonsequential, interdisciplinary courses designed to introduce students to a variety of languages and cultures. They are usually offered in middle and junior high schools, to give students in the young adolescent stage of development a chance to explore a range of academic and vocational fields. They originated in the 1920s, but lost popularity to elementary school sequential language courses and were revived only in the 1970s. Course content generally consists of general language study conducted in English, trial study of several languages, or a combination. It may also include Latin, the United States' language heritage, career awareness, and languages not included in the school curriculum. Implementation requires a detailed curriculum and guide, a basic daily lesson format including foreign language practice, exercises linking the foreign language with English skills and vocabulary building, culture, phrase review, and songs. Scheduling can be very flexible. The teachers are most often foreign language teachers, but all should have an orientation session. Materials can be adapted from those already used in social studies and foreign language departments. Some successful school district programs are willing to share their experiences and materials. (MSE)

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ERIC DIGEST

ERIC Clearinghouse on
Languages and Linguistics

EXPLORATORY FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSES IN THE MIDDLE OR JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Prepared by Dora F. Kennedy
September 1985

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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ERIC Digest

Exploratory Foreign Language Courses in the Middle or Junior High School

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What Is an Exploratory Language Course?

Within the foreign language field, the term "exploratory" refers to self-contained, nonsequential, interdisciplinary courses designed to introduce students to a variety of languages and cultures rather than lengthy courses designed to teach a specific language, although specific languages are experienced (Kennedy and De Lorenzo, 1985). These courses are taught in English except for the foreign language component, and they are usually offered in middle and junior high schools. Exploratory courses are found in most states, with interest in them increasing, especially in the Middle West and in the East.

Why Exploratory Courses at the Middle School Level?

One of the major thrusts of the middle school concept, and of the junior high school as originally conceived, is the provision of opportunities for children in the early adolescent stage of development to explore a broad range of academic and vocational fields. Advocates of exploratory programs feel that such programs are in keeping with the developmental needs of this age group (Hawkins, 1981). The exploratory foreign language course has, therefore, become closely identified with the middle school curriculum. Having been exposed to this type of course, the middle school pupil is better equipped to make a reasoned decision about future language study.

Is the Exploratory Course a New Idea?

By no means. This type of course was first conceived in the late teens and early 1920s during the emergence of the junior high school. It grew in popularity until the post World War II era when the focus shifted to lengthy sequential programs beginning in elementary school. However, a few exploratory programs survived during the 1950s and 60s. In the early 1970s, the course re-emerged as a viable pre high school foreign language experience with content surprisingly similar to the early courses (Kennedy and De Lorenzo, 1985).

How Do the Courses Look?

Exploratory courses fall under three broad classifications based on the nature of their content:

General Language. Content includes introduction to the phenomenon of language, its history and the idea of structure; language families; comparisons among languages; and a look at several languages, including artificial languages such as Esperanto and the concept of computer languages.

Language Potpourri (or "Trial Language Study"). Usually, several weeks each are spent on a few languages, teaching limited survival skills together with cultural material related to each language. Building readiness for more formal study of a foreign language can also be part of this course. The languages sampled are usually those offered in the school system.

Combination. The Kennedy/De Lorenzo survey revealed that most exploratory courses contained elements of both general language and language potpourri in a variety of organizational formats. In addition, several or all of the following elements may be incorporated into the models: (1) Latin as one of the languages explored, or infused throughout the course, or both; (2) language heritage in the United States, e.g., the French, Spanish, German, or native American heritage in America; (3) career awareness, i.e., the role of foreign languages in the world of work; (4) languages other than those taught in the school system incorporated on a less formal basis as planned "experiences" during the course, a language commonly spoken in the community or one of the less commonly taught languages, perhaps.

When instituting an exploratory course, the school system must decide which of such models it will establish. Then, a curriculum guide as well as a detailed curriculum should be written. The guide should include: policies and course organization; goals, concepts, objectives; actual phrases and expressions to be explored for each language (in dialog form); cultural material and projects; sample tests, including an end-of-course test; homework suggestions and grading policy; and basic daily lesson format.

The basic daily lesson format should include: foreign language practice; linking the foreign language with English skills and vocabulary building; culture discussion, projects, and reports; review of the phrases practiced; and the learning of songs. Homework should be given, and students graded as in any other course.

Because of their flexible nature, exploratory courses can fit into the scheduling pattern of most middle schools. Courses have been scheduled to span a year, semester, or nine weeks, for example, meeting daily or on alternate days. A course less than a semester long, however, leaves little time to address the major components, particularly the specific language skills.

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What Preparation Should Teachers Have?

Few institutions offer college level courses like the "World of Language" course at the University of Maryland—Baltimore County, courses specifically designed to prepare students to teach exploratory courses. Consequently, foreign language teachers, preferably those who have a background in more than one foreign language, teach the exploratory course. If teachers in a school know only one language, they can exchange classes at the end of a specified period of time, such as at the end of the semester. Or, as experience in the Prince George's County, Maryland, schools shows, some foreign language teachers may quite easily acquire survival skills in a second foreign language, allowing schools more flexibility in which languages will be included.

Regardless of the teachers' professional preparation, an orientation session should be provided for all teachers who will teach the course for the first time. The session should be designed to ensure that teachers understand the concept of the course and that they follow a daily basic lesson format similar to the one described above. In addition, teachers should be clear about the difference between exploratory courses and Level 1 courses and should be sure that students and parents are also clear about this. The exploratory course is NOT a "watered down" Level 1 course, but rather an interdisciplinary course involving language development and several languages and cultures. Additional inservice sessions should be provided to help the teachers prepare their own long range plan based on the curriculum.

What Types of Materials Are Used?

Materials already in social studies and foreign language departments can be adapted. Maps, texts about countries, filmstrips, films, travel guides, culture pamphlets, and books containing survival phrases and expressions for several languages are all appropriate as are texts dealing with general language concepts, Latin and Greek roots, and the like. Students can also create materials during "hands-on" experience which can be used for teaching other students. It is important, however, that at least one text be designated as "basic" and assigned to each student. Additionally, students should be required to keep a notebook exclusively for the course.

Resources

The following public school systems are frequently mentioned in the literature as having long-standing successful programs, and they are willing to share materials and guides. Contact the Foreign Language Division.

Topeka Public Schools (1970)
624 24th Street
Topeka, KS 66611

Baltimore County Public Schools (1970)
6901 Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21204

Prince George's County Public Schools (1973)
Sasscer Administrative Bldg.
14201 School Lane
Upper Marlboro, MD 20870

Fairfax County Public Schools (1974)
The Administration Center
10700 Page Avenue
Fairfax, VA 22030
(800) 691-2502

Waukesha Public Schools (1979)
222 Maple Avenue
Waukesha, WI 53186

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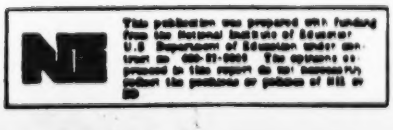
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